The Challenge of Worldwide Migration

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In 2000, an estimated 175 million people lived outside their place of birth, more than ever before. Of these, about 158 million were deemed international migrants; approximately 16 million were recognized refugees fleeing a well-founded fear of persecution and 900,000 were asylum seekers.

They include the skilled Nigerian computer engineer working in Sweden; the agricultural worker from Guatemala working "irregularly" (without legal documentation) in the United States; the woman trafficked from Ukraine to Bosnia; and the refugee from Afghanistan now in Pakistan and about to return home.

Today, the growth of international migration and national interests both clashing and compatible call out for increased international cooperation. The international community needs to establish more widely shared norms and agreed-upon procedures in order to manage better the flow of international migrants to the benefit both of the migrants themselves and the countries of origin, transit, and destination.

Migration: An Element of Globalization

Globalization is a primary force that is shaping the character and impact of migration. Lower travel costs and information and communication technologies have made migration much more viable, the exchange of money and technology that is a result of migration much easier, and return or circular migration more prevalent.

Broadly speaking, the global flows of international migrants can be grouped into labor, family, and refugee categories. They may migrate voluntarily or involuntarily, and may have permanent, temporary, or no legal status.

Better opportunities abroad are the driving factor of voluntary labor migration, attracting both highly educated (e.g. medical and technical) and less-educated (farm and

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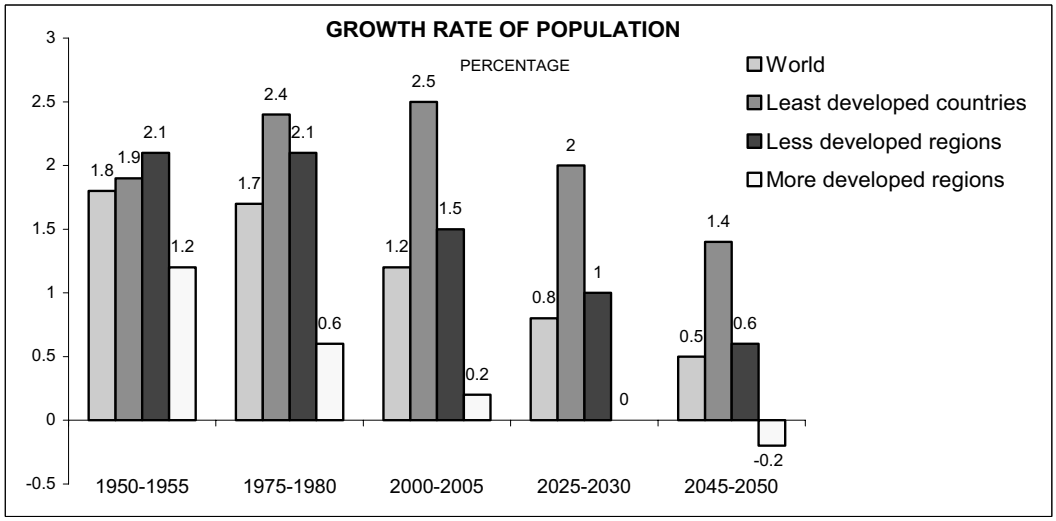
domestic) labor. Some migrants move with the intention of establishing permanent residence. The traditional countries of immigration admit migrants for permanent settlement and grant them the right to apply for citizenship under certain requirements. Many governments recognize the right to family reunification and often permit close family members to enter through legal channels. This has had enormous impact: Family-sponsored migrants accounted for 45 to 75 percent of all international migrants admitted to European and North American countries in 2000.

Other migrants move involuntarily. They include refugees and those with refugee-like status, including temporary protection. Refugees are forced to leave their countries owing to fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. In some regions, those who are outside their country of origin because of armed conflict, generalized violence, severe natural disasters, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed the public order are also accorded refugee-like status.

The situations of documented and undocumented (irregular or "illegal") migrants greatly differ, with the former having a wide range of legal and social protections that the latter lack. An increasingly important dimension of undocumented migration is smuggling and trafficking in human beings. Smuggling involves the facilitation of illegal border crossing or residence in another country with the complicity of the migrant. Trafficking is the coercive, exploitative, and non-consensual movement of persons for profit. It does not necessarily involve a cross-border movement. Although hard to quantify, undocumented migration has risen significantly in the last 10 years, with migrant smuggling and trafficking becoming one of the most profitable branches of organized crime.

Over the longer run, the so-called "Birth Rate Crisis" will make international migration an even more significant factor in globalization. The number of persons aged 60 and above was 600 million in 2000, triple the number in 1950, but less than one-third the



Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs

projected 2 billion of 2050. These changes will have profound consequences and far-reaching implications for pension schemes, health-care systems, education programs, and housing plans, as well as for the economic vitality and growth of a country. Governments will have to radically overhaul migration policies, as well as other established policies and programs, including those on retirement ages, labor-force participation, levels of contributions of workers to retirement and health-care schemes, and benefits for the elderly.

The potential support ratio (the number of persons aged 15 to 64 for each person 65 or older), which measures social security and other potential burdens, decreased from 12 to nine from 1950 to 2000 and will fall to four by 2050. This will particularly impact the health-care sector, where the number of persons older than 85 is also rising steeply. One implication is that the demand for immigrant labor is very likely to rise, particularly in Western Europe and Japan.[1] (U.S., Australian, and Canadian demand, which face similar trends, are already being met so far by legal and illegal immigration.)

National Interests

National interests vary widely by type of country. For countries of origin, international migration can reduce unemployment, contribute to an increase in real wages, provide significant remittance flows (according to estimates, from $60 to $100 billion per annum worldwide, or double official development assistance), and raise standards of living. But it can also induce losses of highly skilled personnel. For countries of destination, international migration tends to have a mixed impact on the economy, particularly on the employment and salaries of non-migrants, and on social transfers. Socially, migrants contribute to cultural diversity in countries of destination, but they also can impose significant costs that include difficulties in integration that lead to welfare dependency, and the observance of cultural practices that some native inhabitants can perceive as threats to their established way of life.

A particularly disturbing trend in recent years is an asylum crisis that is emerging in an increasing number of developed democracies in North America, Europe, and Australasia. Although the vast majority of the world's refugees are in and supported by the developing countries, in the developed countries there is an emerging loss of confidence in the asylum process. Developed countries have spent up to $10 billion per year on asylum, and almost two-thirds of asylum seekers have failed to qualify for asylum. Of those who fail, only a fifth return to their countries of origin. This has led to tighter border controls and, ironically, to increased smuggling and trafficking. Rather than addressing the problem, some politicians in some countries of destination have seized upon asylum as a wedge issue, dividing citizens and vilifying asylum seekers, who are portrayed as threats to cultural integrity, as rivals for welfare provisions, and as criminals. Genuine solutions are needed to ensure that asylum systems determine status quickly and fairly.

International Cooperation

Migration has thus become a key global concern for a growing number of countries of origin, transit, and destination. This is because it touches a wide range of issues, including labor shortages, unemployment, brain drain and brain gain, worker remittances, human rights, refugee/asylum crises, social integration, xenophobia, illegal migration, human trafficking, and national security. And while migration has long been a sensitive matter of national sovereignty, it is beginning to encompass regional and international dimensions.

Increasingly, States are looking for regional and international mechanisms through which to discuss migration issues and trends. Many States want to coordinate their actions better and to develop regional and international guidelines for what is recognized as a global phenomenon with broad economic, social, and security ramifications. And many migrants are looking for someone, or some institution, to advocate for their rights and address their needs.

Unfortunately, where there are laws, organizations, and advocates for migrants and on migration, they tend to be incomplete or insufficient, and to compound the challenges of internationalization. To ensure that migration is a win-win story for States and migrants, stronger international cooperation is warranted.

Such cooperation must ensure that the basic human rights of all people, including migrants, are protected, that the burdens and responsibilities of providing assistance for refugees are shared fairly, and that the positive potential of international migration for migrants, and for sending, transit, and receiving countries, is fully realized. All countries should strive for migration regimes that are transparent, just, and responsive to both the realities of the labor market and rights to family unity.

A first step toward closing the normative gaps can be achieved by disseminating widely the international norms that already exist on migration, such as the Cairo Programme of Action and provisions of human-rights treaties, and by campaigning for broader ratification of the Migrant Workers Convention.

A longer-term, incremental strategy should be focused on issue-centered multilateral agreements. It could begin with issue-specific international conferences designed to build common understanding and reach agreement. Led by groups of Member States, these conferences could address issues such as remittances, citizenship, family reunification, and asylum. This option could replicate the World Trade Organization model by proceeding through successive rounds of negotiation toward issue-specific multilateral agreements.

International migration is lightly institutionalized within the United Nations system, with no agency working systematically across the whole spectrum of the roles listed above. No organization has the broad mandate that would allow the international community better to meet the challenges of internationalization by coordinating action, developing preventive strategies, and fostering constructive solutions. As the absence of

an authoritative United Nations "voice" on migration becomes more keenly felt, the question arises as to how the Organization might develop links to non-UN organizations such as the International Organization of Migration and foster additional forms of inter-agency cooperation, in order to effectively fulfill a role in migration governance and contribute to the migration debate.

The United Nations also needs to influence the migration debate with rigorous and thoughtful advocacy, and by facilitating a series of informal meetings that include civil society, labor, and the private sector, to develop a deeper and wider understanding of the new challenges and opportunities that migration poses.

Migration policy is sufficiently important and complicated that it would benefit from a comprehensive effort to explore the issue in more depth and to gauge the depth of international support for substantial initiatives. Similar challenges have been addressed by global commissions, such as the Brundtland Commission on health. A commission could help mobilize attention, assemble expertise, conduct research, and identify areas of emerging consensus and choice for the international community. Above all, such a group should focus on public education to mobilize the political attention and foster the international understanding that international migration so very much requires. Fortunately, under the leadership of former minister Jan Karlsson (of Sweden) and Dr. Mamphela Ramphele (a managing director of the World Bank, from South Africa), such a commission is now being formed.

But the most important area for international action is political leadership. Politicians can choose to embrace the potential that migrants and refugees represent, or use them as political scapegoats. To avoid the latter, they should begin by "de-mythologizing" migration, addressing negative myths and fears, and informing their publics of the benefits that well-managed migration can produce. Political leaders must share best practices on how to integrate migrants into their societies as full members, with the privileges as well as the obligations that entails. Immigrants and refugees should not be portrayed simply as a burden, but as people who want a safer, more prosperous future for their children, and who are willing to work for it. ♔

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[1] The numbers of migrants needed to offset labor shortages are comparable to those in recent past experience for some developed countries, but much higher for others. The levels of migration needed to offset population aging and maintain current ratios of working to non-working residents are extremely high, and entail vastly more immigration than has occurred in the past.